

The Irish Oscar Wilde: Appropriations of the Artist

Máire ní Fhlathúin

‘It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors’.¹

Oscar Wilde is among the most widely quoted of writers. This is not to say that he is among the most widely read. Other than the well-known snippets of frivolity — the handbag, the carelessness of losing one’s parents — he is famous for reasons quite outside his work. His flamboyance, his homosexuality, his immoral lifestyle, his dramatic end: all are part of the popular perception of ‘Oscar Wilde’, prompting the face on the t-shirt, the entry in the catalogue of ‘gay and lesbian studies’. Alongside this traditional image, there has appeared during the past ten years another persona: the Irish Oscar Wilde. With Terry Eagleton’s *Saint Oscar* (a work of literature which is also a work of criticism), Richard Pine’s *The Thief of Reason: Oscar Wilde and Modern Ireland*, and, most lately, Jerusha McCormack’s edited collection of essays on *Wilde the Irishman*, the man who made London his home and London society his subject matter has been reclaimed as an Irishman, his writings pressed into service in the reconstituted canon of Irish literature. How did the writer who considered frivolity a virtue, the artist who proclaimed that art should be independent of society, find himself laden with the responsibility of bearing the green flag through the battlefield of English studies? In one sense, the answer lies outside of his time — lies in the changing nature of Irish society and the natural wish of a post-colonial culture to reclaim its lost jewels. The Irish Oscar Wilde, it could be argued, was always there, waiting to be noticed, alongside the homosexual Oscar Wilde and the professional journalist and self-publicist. His mother’s Irish nationalism, his father’s interest in Irish folklore, his own sense of his art as ‘part of the Irish Renaissance’² are all inarguably present in the complex of attributes which make up the artist. In another sense, the answer is to be found in himself: the set of poses, statements and stories which makes up his life, as well as his work, is eminently suitable for re-interpretation. With an irony he might have appreciated, it has become clear that the non-instrumental aesthetic he developed is, by its nature, most open to exploitation.

Wilde maintained that literature, art and beautiful objects hold a special position, one outside of normal life and not subject to its constraints or its morality. He also tried to make a

¹Oscar Wilde, ‘Preface: *The Picture of Dorian Gray*’ (1890), in *The Artist as Critic: Critical Writings*, ed. Richard Ellmann (University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 236.

²Declan Kiberd, ‘Oscar Wilde: The Artist as Irishman’, in *Wilde the Irishman*, ed. Jerusha McCormack (Yale

similar case for the artist, both in his critical writing and, disastrously, in his own lifestyle. But even before the Old Bailey verdict made clear that both artist and work could be called to account, Wilde's manipulations of his public image and his critical arguments had already tended to show that this independence was illusory, unsustainable even by its proponent. Wilde's critical essays show his pronouncements on art and literature constantly changing, the one stable component of their aesthetic the sanctity of the artist's vision. At the same time, his own conduct showed that the artist's vision was usually secondary to the artist's opportunism: this persona was equally transient, its only consistent element the physical and legal person of Oscar Wilde. When his real presence was removed from his field of work — first by imprisonment, then by death — the net of contradictions remained, contradictions which could be exploited by any reading.

In the 1887 essay 'The Poets and the People', Wilde carries out a self-imposed, tripartite task: first, to belittle the literary establishment and rival poets; second, to lament the material state of England; and third, to stress the importance of the artist — in this case, the poet. Decrying the 'inherent faults' of the poor, the 'greediness of capitalists', pessimism and distress, he looks to the poets to 'exercise their influence for good, and set fairer ideals before all than the mere love of wealth an ostentatious display on one side, and the desire to appropriate wealth on the other'. In the course of condemning the inadequacy of their response to this need, he indirectly sets out his own poetic manifesto: 'What right has a man to the title of poet when he fails to produce music in his lines'? But Wilde assigns to his ideal poet another characteristic; as well as aesthetic sensibility, he must also carry messianic significance: 'The people are suffering, and are likely to suffer more; where is the poet who is the one man needful to rouse the nation to a sense of duty and inspire the people with hope?'³ In later essays, Wilde was to abandon the idea of the poet's moral or social responsibility, stressing instead that his only duty was that of self-realization. But the other themes — the necessity for beautiful writing, the central role of the artist — are present throughout his work, there as a bed-rock when other arguments are cast aside.

For the Wildean aesthetic, the most important figure is that of the artist. The tensions on which Wilde's critical essays are built — the opposition between life and art, between artist and public, between morality and beauty — are resolvable, in the end, only by accepting that the measure of artistic value is the artist's self-realization. In rejecting all external criteria for value, such as public opinion, morality, realism or naturalism, he was left with the paradoxical

UP, 1998), p. 21.

³Wilde, 'The Poets and the People' (1887), in *Critical Writings*, pp. 43, 43, 44, 44, 45.

conclusion that the value of a work of art is not in itself, but in its creator: ‘*A work of art is the unique result of a unique temperament. Its beauty comes from the fact that the author is what he is. It has nothing to do with the fact that other people want what they want.*’⁴

This process may be clearly seen in the critical passages where Wilde considers the nature of art and the relationship between artist and audience. In each case, an opening concern with the abstract qualities of Art is transformed into a celebration of the figure of the artist — most notably in ‘The Decay of Lying’, where Vivian’s summary of ‘the doctrines of the new aesthetics’ ends by directing attention back to himself, the artist-figure, and the figure of the liar. Initially concerned with the proper subject-matter of art, the first of these principles — ‘Art never expresses anything but itself’ — is eventually expanded by: ‘All bad art comes from returning to Life and Nature, and elevating them into ideals. Life and Nature may sometimes be used as part of Art’s rough material, but before they are of any real service to art they must be translated into artistic conventions.’ This emphasis on the role of the artist as shaper, controlling the representation of Nature, is given further point in the third doctrine: ‘Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life’. The fourth point brings the figure of the artist entirely to the front, as Vivian declares: ‘Lying, the telling of beautiful untrue things, is the proper aim of Art.’ Immediately, the focus of the essay moves back to the liar, the first artist mentioned earlier in the essay: ‘who first, without ever having gone out to the rude chase, told the wandering cavemen at sunset how he had dragged the Megatherium from the purple darkness of its jasper cave, or slain the Mammoth in single combat and brought back its gilded tusks’. Finally, Vivian himself takes on this role; the view which ends the essay is not a descriptive passage but a web of literary references: ‘And now let us go out on the terrace, where “droops the milk-white peacock like a ghost,” while the evening star “washes the dusk with silver.” At twilight nature becomes a wonderfully suggestive effect, and is not without loveliness, though perhaps its chief use is to illustrate quotations from the poets.’⁵ The analysis of Art and Nature is itself shown to be a creation of the speaker, the artist, whose voice is the bedrock on which the essay is built.

Nor is this declaration merely rhetorical: Wilde puts it into practice in discussion of the relations between the public and the artist. Even at his most provocative — trying, in ‘The Soul of Man under Socialism’, for instance, to make a direct connection between public opprobrium and artistic value — he finds the concept of self-realization essential. When, Wilde claims, the public ‘say a work is grossly unintelligible, they mean that the artist has said or made a beautiful thing that is new; when they describe a work as grossly immoral, they mean that the artist has

⁴Wilde, ‘The Soul of Man under Socialism’ (1891), in *Critical Writings*, p. 270. Italics in original.

⁵Wilde, ‘Intentions’ (1891), in *Critical Writings*, pp. 319, 319, 319, 320, 320, 305, 320.

said or made a beautiful thing that is true'. But this isomorphism of public disgust and artistic value immediately collapses, as he remarks: 'That they should have called Wordsworth an immoral poet, was only to be expected. Wordsworth was a poet. But that they should have called Charles Kingsley an immoral novelist is extraordinary. Kingsley's prose was not of a very fine quality.' Abandoning his attempt to link (im)morality and literary value, he returns again to the one unshakable tenet of his aesthetic: 'An artist is, of course, not disturbed by [the word 'immoral']. The true artist is a man who believes absolutely in himself, because he is absolutely himself'.⁶ With this invocation of the artist in person, Wilde has freed himself from the logical morass of literary and moral value; the certainty with which he states his article of faith merely goes to prove, by his logic, his absolute fitness to pronounce on the matter. The artist is his own justification, transcending in his physical being the abstract problems of morality and beauty.

This principle Wilde put into practice in his letters defending *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, where he rejects any motive for writing other than, again, self-realization:

The pleasure that one has in creating a work of art is a purely personal pleasure, and it is for the sake of this pleasure that one creates. The artist works with his eye on the object. Nothing else interests him. What people are likely to say does not even occur to him. He is fascinated by what he has in hand. He is indifferent to others. I write because it gives me the greatest possible artistic pleasure to write. If my work pleases the few, I am gratified. If it does not, it causes me no pain.⁷

Here, the measure of value is purely personal and has no meaning for anyone other than the artist. But the public, also, is expected to abide by this measure, taking the artist's creation as the only standard by which to judge it. At this extreme, Wilde's doctrine implies that even the ideal standard of beauty is set by the artist. The audience, he writes in 'The Soul of Man under Socialism', should put aside their own views and prejudices: 'For an educated person's ideas of Art are drawn naturally from what Art has been, whereas the new work of art is beautiful by being what Art has never been; and to measure it by the standard of the past is to measure it by a standard on the rejection of which its real perfection depends.'⁸ The artist's value, it appears, lies in his ability to realize his own character, to be most fully himself; the value of the work of art lies in its being most essentially itself, independent of the critical standards of the past or the present.

⁶Wilde, 'The Soul of Man under Socialism', in *Critical Writings*, p. 273.

⁷'Letter to the Editor', *Scots Observer*, 8 July 1890, in *Selected Letters*, ed. Rupert Hart-Davis (Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 81.

⁸ Wilde, 'The Soul of Man under Socialism', in *Critical Writings*, p. 279.

As Norbert Kohl points out, Wilde's theories of art and aesthetics are both changeable and contradictory. The early essays claim that the poet has a duty to society: 'art should beautify the world and the things of everyday life'; the later work maintains that art is useless. The theory expounded in 'The Critic as Artist' — art and ethics have nothing to do with one another — is 'shattered by the fate of Dorian Gray'.⁹ The contradictions are resolved, as we have seen, by Wilde's ascribing to the artist the personal role of creator and legitimizer of his work: the work of art is ultimately valuable in so far as it reflects its maker. In Wilde's own life, however, there is no essential figure of the artist. Instead, there is a person of many names and many roles.

Wilde showed a consistent expediency in adapting his life, like his writing, to consumerist ends. Through serial re-inventions of his persona, he implicitly contradicts the view expressed in his writing that the artist should be above public censure or acclaim. At any rate, the artist, in the person of Oscar Wilde, was all too ready to fulfil audience expectations. This trait is apparent all through his life, from his early experiments with the representations of reality to his last days in exile. Richard Ellmann recounts how an accidental collision with 'an aged cripple', during his schooldays, is transformed for his audience of school-fellows into an epic contest: 'an angry giant had barred his path, he had had to fight him through round after round and eventually, after prodigies of valour, to leave him for dead'.¹⁰ Ellmann connects this incident to the further transformation in 'The Critic as Artist', where the schoolboy becomes the Caveman and his opponent the Mammoth. In each case, Wilde clearly regarded his own life as the raw material for these fantasies. The same process is evident in the account of his celebrity in Palermo, written in the last year of his life: 'My incognito vanished in three hours, and the students used to come to the café to talk — or rather to listen. To their great delight I always denied my identity. On being asked my name, I said every man has only one name. They asked me what that name was. 'Io' was my answer. This was regarded as a wonderful reply, containing in it all philosophy.'¹¹ Not only life, however, was the stuff of change; so were politics and nationalism. In one particular episode in Wilde's life: his 1882 lecture tour of the USA, there is apparent some compelling evidence for a post-colonial reading of Wilde as Irishman, and equally convincing suggestions that this reading would be, at best, one-sided.¹²

In the USA, Wilde went to enormous trouble to create a public persona which would

⁹Norbert Kohl, *Oscar Wilde: The Works of a Conformist Rebel*, tr. David Henry Wilson (Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 320.

¹⁰Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1988), p. 22. Also Davis Coakley, *Oscar Wilde: The Importance of Being Irish* (Town House, 1994), pp. 82-3.

¹¹ Wilde, 'Letter to Robert Ross', (21 April 1900), in *Selected Letters*, p. 359.

¹² Fintan O'Toole discusses this episode in detail: 'Venus in Blue Jeans: Oscar Wilde, Jesse James, Crime and Fame', in *Wilde the Irishman*, pp. 71-81.

reflect the implied author of his works. He displayed a sharp awareness of the importance of effect, as well as beauty, in requesting particular costumes for his lectures. Demanding special attire — ‘tight velvet doublet, with large flowered sleeves and little ruffs of cambric’, knee-breeches and silk stockings, all of which together would ‘excite a great sensation’ — Wilde was already playing to his audience: ‘They were dreadfully disappointed at Cincinnati at my not wearing knee-breeches.’¹³

This, however, was not his first experience of changing style, and it was certainly not to be the last. Earlier, Wilde had, at Oxford, discarded his Irish accent along with his Dublin clothing, immersing himself in his new surroundings to the extent of identifying himself with England in the rhetorical questions of ‘Ave Imperatrix’: ‘Where is our English chivalry?’¹⁴ At the same time, however, he had continued publishing poems in Irish journals, as Nick Frankel points out.¹⁵ Now, seeking a role in the USA, he discovered Irish-America as a possible ally, and rapidly recovered an Irish identity. Though the *Irish Nation* headline of 14 January 1882 bitterly contrasted ‘The Utterness of [Wilde’s] Aestheticism’ and the ‘Hideous Tyranny’ overshadowing Ireland, Wilde was soon to adopt a nationalist air, speaking as a representative of his native country on republicanism, the Irish claim to the invention of rhyme, the Phoenix Park murders and ‘The Irish Poets of 1848’.¹⁶ His mother’s reputation was also of service: an exaggerated account of her ‘conversion’ to nationalism while watching Thomas Davis’s funeral formed part of a lecture.¹⁷ The link thus created between Davis and himself is another example of Wilde’s opportunist image-making. Adapting, as required, appearance, accent and political stance, he ensured that the changing nature of his persona focused attention back on the one constant element, his physical self — the figure, literally this time, of the artist, to whose advantage all this change was directed. So much is apparent when Wilde’s Irish connections are used to further his mother’s literary aspirations: ‘In Boston Wilde met the Irish poet John Boyle O’Reilly and he explored with him the possibility of getting Speranza’s collection of poetry published in America. A former Fenian, O’Reilly was an influential figure and editor of the *Boston Pilot*.’¹⁸ Far from being the central aspect of his life, as later claimed, Wilde’s Irishness appears, at this point at least, a matter of little moment, to be opportunistically adopted when

¹³ Wilde, ‘Letter to Colonel W. F. Morse’ (? 26 February 1882), in *Selected Letters*, p. 34.

¹⁴ Wilde, ‘Ave Imperatrix’ (1881), in *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, int. Vyvyan Holland (London: Collins, 1948), p. 712.

¹⁵ Nick Frankel, ‘“Ave Imperatrix”: Oscar Wilde and the Poetry of Englishness’, *Victorian Poetry* vol 35, no. 2 (1997), pp. 117-37.

¹⁶ See Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, pp. 37, 185-7.

¹⁷ See Terence de Vere White, *The Parents of Oscar Wilde: Sir William and Lady Wilde* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1967), pp. 80-1.

¹⁸ Coakley, *Oscar Wilde*, p. 184.

most appropriate, at the time when Irish identity will further his role as an artist (or his mother's as a writer).

The concept of the mask is a basic theme in criticism of Wilde's life and work. Russell Jackson and Ian Small discuss its provenance as moral paradigm, stemming from Ellmann's early work, with the assumption being that there is a reality which the masks conceal. They prefer to regard it in a different light:

Wilde's adopting of masks can be better explained in terms of an attempt to present his life in terms which were appropriate to artifacts, particularly *literary* artifacts — that is, to present his life as a kind of *text*, but a text which he, as sole author, could control in the same way as he attempted to control his written works.

They see Wilde's revisions of his plays as 'responses to local circumstances' rather than attempts to approach an ideal version, relating this to 'the expedient self-fashioning of his life'.¹⁹ In this way, the mask is used, not to cloak the essence of the individual but to replace it. 'My name is Ernest in town and Jack in the country':²⁰ thus the character in *The Importance of Being Earnest* who appears in the cast list as 'John Worthing, J. P.' But the discovery that he is 'really' named 'Ernest' exposes 'John Worthing' as a sham. The mask becomes the reality — a reality which is, in its turn, destabilized by the knowledge that Jack/Ernest has not yet been christened, so that the play ends with the dance of names still unresolved. In the same way, it is debatable whether the 'mask' of Dorian Gray is the portrait in the attic, which responds to real life, or the living man, ageless as a work of art. In both cases, the changing of names and forms leaves the physical body as the only stable entity; certainly, at the end of both works, the dilemma of mutability is resolved by a return to the body. There is a man, whatever his name, who will marry Cecily; there is a corpse on the attic floor, recognizable only by the rings on its fingers. As the literary criticism continually returns to the figure of the artist, so the human figure is the central point of the fiction: names, theories, metaphysical attributes are all discarded in the fixation on the artist/body. And there, in the body, is where the consumerist, expedient self-fashioning of life and work must come to an end.

Jackson and Small argue that 'external and contingent forces' acted upon Wilde, 'with the result that in the end [he] had no control over the ways in which his masks (like his works) were understood'.²¹ In fact, Wilde's control of his works lasted only so long as his masks were his own property, so long as the body of the man corresponded to the image of the artist. His

¹⁹Russell Jackson and Ian Small, 'Oscar Wilde: A "Writerly" Life', *Modern Drama*, vol. 37, no. 1 (Spring 1994): pp. 5, 8, 10.

²⁰Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1899), *Collected Works*, p. 325.

aesthetic, continually invoking an artistic persona, is stable only so long as there is an independent, self-defined body. When that is gone, when Wilde himself has been defined by courts, biographers, and critics, the ambiguities of his art lend themselves to any re-reading — most notably the readings of those engage upon gay studies and Irish post-colonial criticism. Once Wilde was arrested, tried, imprisoned and named as criminal and pervert, he was no longer in control either of his works or of his self. With his plays no longer acceptable on the stage, his career as a dramatist was effectively over, and he left England. Pathetic anecdotes of his downfall replaced the self-glorifying stories of the London years. Once he was dead, his life became the ground of conflict between various biographers, an emblem of gay pride, and, finally, a quarry to be mined by the cultural representatives of Ireland. The chameleon persona was eventually transfixed, along with his physical body, as he was given the complementary forms of criminal and martyr.

In this, their present incarnation, his life and work are essentialized again, reclaimed for the Irish tradition as Wilde is figured as Other, outsider, the Caliban who exposes the hypocrisy of the English establishment's respectable Prospero. This is the transformation at work in Seamus Heaney's introduction to 'The Ballad of Reading Gaol', in which he offers a particular account of Oscar Wilde: 'another felon of our land, another prisoner in an English jail so that the ballad then becomes the link in a chain including John Mitchell's *Jail Journal* and Brendan Behan's *The Quare Fellow*, prison literature. This poem written by the son of Speranza... may be devoid of Irish nationalist political intent but it is full of subversive anti-Establishment sentiment. It has about it a kind of high banshee lament, the voice of one crying in the wilderness.'²² By an interesting replication of Wilde's own strategies, the impeccably nationalist credentials of Speranza are used to colour her son's memory, with Mitchell and Behan joining Thomas Davis as Wilde's associates in literature.

Another aspect of this process is apparent in the writings of the group of scholars associated with Field Day enterprises. Declan Kiberd, introducing the section in the *Field Day Anthology* on 'The London Exiles: Wilde and Shaw', describes Wilde in terms of his role in a dynasty of Irish writers. He credits Wilde, along with Shaw, with having 'toppled the stage Irishman from his plinth', tracing Wilde's influence in the works of Synge, Beckett and Yeats. More than this, he sees in his very life a political challenge to the English assumption that the Irish were different, antithetical: 'the ease with which Wilde effected the transition from stage Irishman to stage Englishman was his ultimate comment on the hollowness of the antithesis, on

²¹Jackson and Small, 'Oscar Wilde', 5.

²²Quoted in Coakley, *Oscar Wilde*, p. 212.

the emptiness of both notions'.²³ Again, Wilde's literary work is evaluated in terms of its Irishness, and his inconsistent life read as a deliberate political statement rather than a series of responses to circumstances.

In the same way, Neil Sammells, insisting that Wilde's writing should be viewed in the light of 'the political realities of his colonial situation', claims: 'As a member of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy, Wilde is implicate in English domination, yet contemptuous of it — a contradiction enacted in his precise deployment, and disarming, of the language itself.'²⁴ In support of this, he points to Wilde's reviews of Mahaffy's *Greek Life and Thought* and J. A. Froude's *The Two Chiefs of Dunboy* as evidence of his preoccupation with Irish causes. But the rhetorical flourish quoted — 'I am not English. I am Irish', which also provides the title of Sammells' essay — is indicative of little beyond Wilde's deliberate ambiguity: 'If the Censor refuses *Salomé*, I shall leave England to settle in France where I shall take out letters of naturalization. I will not consent to call myself a citizen of a country that shows such narrowness in artistic judgement. I am not English. I am Irish which is quite another thing.'²⁵ Far from being a statement about the essential nature of nationality, it is a proclamation of the supreme importance of 'artistic judgement', of the right and duty of the artist to repudiate a country which could refuse his work. Nationalism, like nationality, is secondary to art.

The appropriation of Wilde as Irishman is apparent in its purest form in Terry Eagleton's biographical play, *Saint Oscar*. In the author's preface, Wilde is invested with the concerns and desires of Eagleton himself, becoming the embodiment of battered Irishness. Not only is he the pattern for the bewilderment of both cultures — 'most distinctively Irish' when 'most typically upper-class English' — but he stands in his own body for the Irish self-image, an icon stretching from the nineteenth century to the present day. Irish dualism is personified 'in the life of Oscar Wilde, clown and victim, scapegoat and entertainer'; while his 'treatment at the hands of a brutal, arrogant British Establishment is being acted out once more in Ireland today, with brutality of a different kind'. In his invocation of the 'shade of Oscar Wilde' in the cause of 'small nations',²⁶ Eagleton ascribes to him an unqualified nationalism which appears in its very passion uncharacteristic of a man so ambiguous in all his work. In the play, Wilde's physical being is taken over, made to represent his (or Eagleton's) ideas in concrete form. Eagleton's

²³Declan Kiberd, 'The London Exiles: Wilde and Shaw', in *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, gen. ed. Seamus Deane, asc. eds. Andrew Carpenter, Jonathan Williams, 3 vols. (Field Day Publications, 1991), vol II, pp. 373, 374.

²⁴Neil Sammells, 'Oscar Wilde: Quite Another Thing', in *Irish Writing: Exile and Subversion*, eds. Paul Hyland and Neil Sammells (Macmillan, 1991), p. 124.

²⁵Quoted in Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, pp. 351-2.

²⁶Terry Eagleton, 'Preface', *Saint Oscar* (Field Day Publications, 1989), pp. vii, vii, xi, xi, xii, xii.

Wilde claims that he is ‘speaking up for’ the poor — ‘those mill girls reading Shakespeare’ — simply by his presence: ‘just by sitting here’.

It could be argued, finally, that it was Wilde’s insistence on the pre-eminence of the artist’s self which opens the way for all the posthumous appropriations. The power of agency and authority dies with the body: since Wilde’s aesthetic was predicated on the living artist, whose greatest work of art was, in his view, his life, the fixed point is gone with his death and the locus of the artist becomes a space to be disputed among critics. The constants of literary value and beauty are appropriated, as usual, to reflect the ideals of literary fashion; Wilde’s intangible, self-referential constructions are given form and structure by a post-colonial critical reading, becoming weapons in the armoury of Irish cultural nationalism. Eagleton’s Wilde is certain of his role:

The Irish have always understood about failure. They need to: there’s a lot of it over there.

No nation was ever so much in love with losing; they can’t get enough of it. A nation of brilliant failures; they lost most of the battles they celebrate. But they know the meaning of sacrifice; to be immolated on the altar of oneself. The martyr will always worst the conqueror. Power the conqueror can understand: it’s sheer helplessness which leaves him disarmed. Helplessness was always Ireland’s secret weapon.²⁷

Wilde himself was far less enamoured of ‘the pathetic fallacy of martyrdom’, as the words he gives the narrator of ‘The Portrait of Mr W. H.’ indicate: ‘Martyrdom was to me merely a tragic form of scepticism, an attempt to realise by fire what one had failed to do by faith. No man dies for what he knows to be true. Men die for what they want to be true, for what some terror in their hearts tells them is not true.’²⁸ By the time of Wilde’s death, however, he had already lost control of his life and his work. The process of appropriation had begun. When he signed *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* as the anonymous C.3.3, voluntarily adopting the role of the prisoner, he left behind the role of the artist. When Oscar Wilde became Sebastian Melmoth, the name associated with writing and aesthetics was replaced by the names of a martyr and a literary construction: Melmoth the Wanderer. His death merely finalized this process of displacement, removing the body at the core of the Wildean aesthetic. With the recreation of this body in the image of the representative Irishman, and the accompanying re-readings of his work, the subtleties of his own critical position are ignored. The writer’s value is no longer, if it was ever, in the ideas or the character of his expression; it is measured in the currency of politics and

²⁷Eagleton, *Saint Oscar*, pp. 58, 58, 58, 49.

²⁸Oscar Wilde, ‘The Portrait of Mr. W. H.’ (1921), in *Critical Writings*, p. 219.

sexuality, and lies in the set of associations that can be tied to his name.